

NAFTA hurts region's economy: panel

By **KIM GUFFEY**

Messenger staff reporter

A small group of area residents attended a public forum Saturday to discuss the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on Athens and surrounding counties.

Panelists Nelsonville City Councilman Bill Wend, Donkey Coffee owner and Christian activist Chris Pyle, and former U.S. Rep. Jim Jontz reported their displeasure with various aspects of free trade agreements ranging from American job loss to union perspectives, and urged citizens to vote for Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry.

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Jason Tockman

Stop Outsourcing Ohio

Jason Tockman of Stop Outsourcing Ohio served as a moderator and opened discussions with an overview of NAFTA.

"NAFTA has five letters, but has become a bit of a four-letter word," he said.

Tockman said that free trade agreements as they are written now benefit large corporations rather than protect people's rights.

The agreement, he said, has created a "race to the bottom," by providing protection for corporations to operate in countries with little or no environmental standards or worker protection laws — something that he said typically means moving out of the United States.

Wend said that over the past few years, NAFTA has caused Nelsonville to lose large amounts of money from state funds that the city uses to pay for fire and police protection costs.

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"This is a quality of life issue to me," Wend said. "This will affect will affect our children and grandchildren as less money comes in to our communities."

For a local example of outsourcing, Wend pointed to the shutdown of the Nelsonville Rocky Shoes and Boots factory in 2001. While Wend said he was sad to see the manufacturing jobs go, he said he understood that it was national trade policies — and not the factory owners — that ultimately caused the move.

"They didn't want to shut those doors, but they had to compete," Wend said.

In a previous interview with The Messenger, Rocky Boots chief executive officer Mike Brooks said the outsourcing of his manufacturing was "just human; outsourcing is something that happens."

Brooks said he would have liked to keep the factory operating in Nelsonville but said the company now has a larger in-state payroll than it did when boots were being produced in Ohio.

Wend and the other panelists encouraged people to call the state and federal legislatures and ask the elected officials to take a stand against new free trade agreements.

Using faith as a backdrop, Pyle used Biblical definitions of justice and injustice to make an appeal to Christians that free trade agreements have taken advantage of the poor and needy. He said NAFTA's private tribunal meetings are un-Biblical and the premise of the agreements is motivated by greed.

Union organizers in the audience were urged to distribute information to union members regarding free trade agreements, as well as to urge them to vote for Kerry.